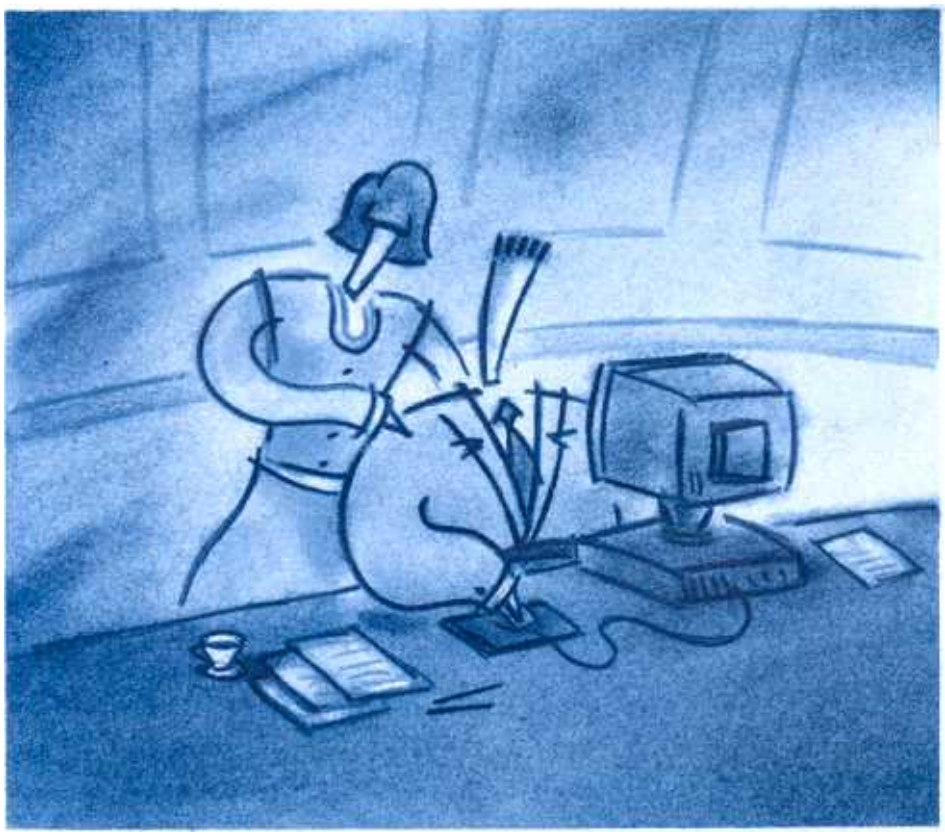

School's in: Bars educate the public

By Jennifer Martin

Darlene Smith likes to be prepared. So after her husband passed away in 1997, she started thinking about how to plan for the settlement of her estate in the event of her own death. "I wanted to make sure I had done everything I needed to do, so that there wouldn't be so many things undone for my children," says the Knoxville, Tenn., resident.

Smith enrolled in the Knoxville Bar Association's Community Law School, where she took a class on wills and estates. For a nominal fee, Smith learned about estate tax laws, powers of attorney, living wills, and other subjects. "They had terrific handouts, and the speaker was great," she says. "I made the handouts available at my church."

Smith is one of thousands of people nationwide who have taken advantage of public education in the law offered by state and local bar associations. Ranging from one-time seminars to weekly classes that span several months, the programs give everyday people a glimpse of the U.S. legal system and how it's run.

Citizens' law schools tend to be extremely popular wherever they're introduced. Often, there's a waiting list to get in. The schools can attract up to 100 students—sometimes more. The State Bar Association of North Dakota conducts classes in four cities each year that draw 100 students to each location.

Bars tend to schedule these schools once a year—say, in the spring or fall—and publicize them well in advance in the media. They take place at government buildings, local colleges, bar association offices, and other venues. Organizers say a wide variety of people sign up for the seminars, including businesspeople, homemakers, students, retirees, and people who are thinking of enrolling in law school.

"People love it," says Diane K. Minnich, executive director of the Idaho State Bar, which offers its academy in the fall. "It's good information, sort of 'inside' information. We have 30 or 35 spots in the class, and the first time we held it, we got some 100 applicants. Now, we still get 40 or 50."

A variety of classes

"We try to empower people to know that the law belongs to them," says Mike Rankin, coordinator of the People's Law School for the Columbus (Ohio) Bar Association. "We do that by giving them knowledge—for instance, how laws are made." Columbus' first session covers the legislative process, along with how to choose an attorney and negotiate fees.

Family law attorney Heather Sowald of Columbus, along with a judge from domestic relations court, teaches domestic law for the Columbus bar. Their class covers areas such as divorce, spousal support, property division, and child custody.

"The participants usually have a lot of questions," Sowald says. "A lot of times, either they've been through their own divorce case, or a relative or friend has. I don't give advice on their particular cases; I just give them general advice on what the statutes say."

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>
> —*Mike Rankin*

Courses on criminal law and wills, trusts, and estates tend to draw the most people, some say, but other topics bring interested audiences, too: personal injury law, consumer rights, property law, and employment law, among them.

New courses are often rotated into citizen law schools to keep them interesting. The Columbus bar, for example, recently implemented a class on eldercare issues such as reverse mortgages, nursing home care, home health care, Medicaid, Medicare, and long-term care insurance.

"Half the class is people in their late 40s and older," Rankin says. "They're dealing with either their own issues, or they've got parents who are dealing with those issues."

Columbus also launched a new class last year called "Privacy Issues in the Post-9/11 World." It addressed how to prevent the theft of personal information—or what steps to take if such information is stolen. "I think identity theft is one of those things that's clearly on people's minds this year," Rankin says.

The Knoxville bar changes its curriculum every other year, rotating in classes such as bankruptcy law, juvenile law, and Social Security/disability law. "Everybody gets to pick two classes, and they're about 90 minutes apiece," says Tom R. Ramsey III, chair of the Community Law School. "But we don't hold them to that. If people want to swap classes, it's not a problem."

Linda Copple Trout (left), chief justice of the Idaho Supreme Court, presents Irene Victory with her diploma from the Idaho State Bar's Citizens' Law Academy.

Creative presentation

The presentations can be as creative as the educators themselves. Deputy Ada County (Idaho) Prosecutor Shelly Armstrong and a defense attorney create a mock criminal case—such as a sexual assault—and walk the audience through the legal proceedings. "We'll start at the hospital and talk about where a rape kit goes, the chain of custody, all those different issues," Armstrong says.

They proceed to pretrial motions, the trial itself, sentencing, and appeal. "We talk about the emotional issues and all the people who will show up in court," Armstrong says, adding that these people include relatives and friends of both the victim and the defendant.

The class also examines complicating factors such as whether the defendant was intoxicated when he confessed. "Practicing law is really an art form," Armstrong says. "Sometimes, there's no yes-or-no answer."

In one Idaho class, Judge Stephen Trott of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals traces the evolution of law from ancient history. "He goes back to the Romans and Greeks and King George, and he talks about the things

Members of the December 2000 Idaho State Bar Citizens' Law Academy graduating class pose for their official "class portrait."

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> —*Judge B. Lynn Winmill*

we picked from all of these sources to become our rule of law in America," says Rita Ryan, communications director for the Idaho bar. "He also talks about how bad laws get righted over time. He instills a real pride in our system."

Students teaching students

Classes tend to be either free or low-cost (Knoxville, for example, charges $15 for two classes). With so much helpful information available, the classes often attract students who need to stay on top of the law for professional reasons. Patrick Orr, for example, signed up for the Idaho bar's Citizens' Law Academy not long after he became a reporter for the *Idaho Statesman* in Boise.

"I've always had a lot of experience with criminal trials, but civil trials are something I'd like to do a lot more reporting on," Orr says. "The discovery in a civil case is far more complex. [The class] helped me understand a lot of that."

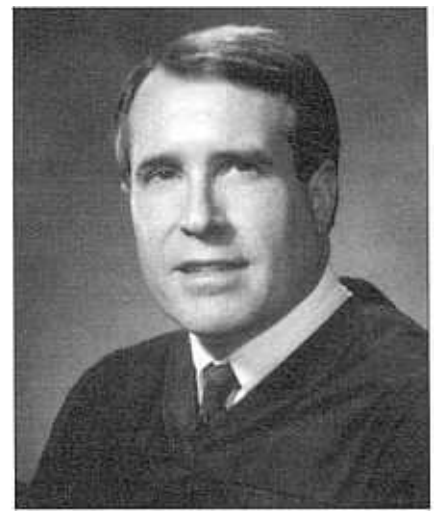
When the seminars turned to criminal law subjects, Orr often found himself the focus of attention. "We ended up talking about the media, because that's how the law is disseminated to [the public]," he says. "Some people in the class felt newspapers and TV had agendas when we covered every story."

Orr tried to explain how reporters and editors sift out the most pertinent facts from the avalanche of information in criminal stories. He enjoyed the experience so much that he came back to teach a class on how criminal justice is portrayed in the media. "I think people liked it a lot," says Orr, who explained concepts such as news judgment and how stories are covered. Orr taught the class with a television news reporter and a prosecutor from the Idaho attorney general's office.

Dispelling myths

According to those who conduct them, citizen law schools don't just educate the public; they soften public opinion about the "professors"—lawyers, judges, law enforcement officials, and others in the legal system. Instructors are usually not paid, and they tend to be the best and brightest—those who bring a history of practical experience to the classroom. For example, Idaho's chief district judge, B. Lynn Winmill, teaches a class on sentencing issues for the Idaho bar's Citizens' Law Academy.

"I love the give-and-take," says Winmill, who's also been known to answer questions from jurors for up to 45 minutes after trials. "Anything we can do to improve the public's understanding of the judiciary is going to make our jobs smoother."



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Indeed, dispelling myths is one of the strongest incentives for teaching these classes, instructors say. As Winmill notes, "I sometimes think every TV show focuses in some way on the legal system. That's the good news. The bad news is that it's entertainment; it's not necessarily educational.

"I would say there's probably more interest in the legal system today than there ever has been, but I also think there's more misunderstanding than there ever has been."

B. Lynn Winmill (right), chief District Court judge for Idaho, presents grant funding to Allen Derr, chair of the Idaho state bar's Public Information Committee, to support the Citizens' Law Academy in the fourth judicial district. The grant was from the United States District and Bankruptcy Court's Community Outreach Program. The initial grant was for $4000; the District Court subsequently funded an additional $3600 for the same purpose.

Diane K. Minnich: "People love our Citizens' Law Academy. It's good information, sort of 'inside' information.'

Caricatures of overzealous prosecutors were a major factor that led Armstrong to teach classes for the Idaho bar. "I think there's a perception out there that all we care about is getting convictions, and the glory of the spotlight," she says. "It makes good television. If prosecutors were portrayed how they really are, it would be pretty boring."

Armstrong hopes that her seminars help citizens understand the painstaking, methodical procedures that prosecutors follow day after day. "[The students] could be future jurors, they could potentially be a crime victim, or they could be someone whose relative is having trouble with the law," she says. "I want to make sure they feel confident in the process."

Instructors learn, too

Instructors say they often gain as much from the classes as the students do. "I learn from people in the audience," says Jodi Bjornson, a Bismarck attorney who teaches for the North Dakota bar. Bjornson's class on human rights law draws a number of employers with some experience in that arena.

"If there's a question that comes up, a lot of times other people in the classroom have a very insightful answer," Bjornson says.

The exchange of ideas with students from a variety of backgrounds is another major attraction for instructors. "I enjoy meeting people outside the profession," says attorney John Landolfi, an instructor for the Columbus bar. "I deal with lawyers all day long, and it's great to meet people who don't necessarily have the same training or background."

Powerful lessons

But the overriding interest for these instructors is battling ignorance about the law. And students say they're amazed by how much they learn. Ross Mason, a former news reporter for 20 years, knew much of the material when he signed up for Idaho's academy. But he still was in the dark in some areas.

"I was really surprised by how little I knew about federal sentencing guidelines," says Mason, now a public information officer for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. "I didn't like the idea of them very much, but they bother me a lot now."

He cites an example given in class about a man who went to prison for eight years on a first-time conviction for using cocaine. "He was within a certain distance of a school [which necessitated this sentence], even though it was the middle of summer and it was on the weekend," Mason says. "I think this [sentence] was a mistake."

Instructors say they hope experiences like Mason's inspire students to see the law as more human. That perception might help them to change laws for the better, or at least be fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Says Rankin: "We try to take away some of the mystery so that they can become better consumers of the law in their personal and business lives." BL

One bar's efforts

Spreading the word in Wyoming

To help spread its message that "Lawyers Help People," leaders of the Wyoming State Bar relied on a little help from their friends—most notably, the Virginia State Bar and the ABA.

For a "reasonable" licensing fee, the Virginia bar provided the Wyoming bar with materials and ideas to use for the "Lawyers Help People" campaign, says Tim Day, immediate past president of the Wyoming bar. The ABA's help is being employed via celebrity public service announcements the ABA has provided nationwide to promote lawyer referral service lines. The commercial spots provide a six-second "local" tagline that Wyoming uses to promote its LRS (see "Lawyer referral PSAs to hit the radio airwaves," March-April 2002, page 5).

Launched last March, "Lawyers Help People" has a dual purpose: to educate the public about the legal system (LRS in particular) and to promote the work and services provided by attorneys. "The majority of our members are concerned about the negative image of attorneys," Day says. "We hope we can recast the legal profession in a more positive image."

The first phase of the program, modeled after Virginia's, has involved sending three different posters to attorneys, courthouses, libraries, and other public facilities statewide. The posters address issues such as child custody, health insurance, and business. The second phase, launched later last year, includes PSAs on radio and television.

A state bar committee will monitor the program to gauge its effectiveness. Day says the bar has seen increased calls to state LRS lines and more hits on its Web site.

Day says the image aspect of the campaign dovetails well with a long-standing tradition among Wyoming lawyers. Several years ago, a prominent state judge and lawyer came up with his own slogan: "Proud to be a Wyoming Lawyer." The slogan soon made its way onto buttons, as well as the state bar's letterhead.

"We're a small, tight-knit group and we've got a lot to be proud of," Day says.

—Robert J. Derocher